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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Arts
(Photography Concentration)
School of Photography and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

By

Ishak Gaffar

Spring, 2000

Thesis Board Members

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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

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To one and all, I **THANK YOU** from the bottom of my heart.

To my friends who lost their loved ones
through the unfounded and senseless violence
on the streets of Rochester, New York and
survived as the true victims of the crime.

To look at works of art merely as objects that give pleasure because of their lines and colors, the attractiveness of their patterns, the warmth of their subject matter, or the emotions that they evoke is to forget sometimes that art can be an extraordinarily rich means to communicate political or sociological messages.

Paul N Perrot

(Alfredo Jaar: Geography=War)

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

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Introduction

My dilemma as an artist is how to make art of information that most of us would rather ignore. How do you actually make art when the world is in such a state? ¹

The primary goals of my thesis, **Where Do We Go From Here**, are to use art to help families who have lost a love one through violence, and to bring an understanding about issues of violence back to the communities in order to seek solutions. This will also help in the process of healing and strengthening of the community. My work is a catalyst for motivating people to action. Another goal is to bring children, family, and communities together to learn, to laugh, to cry and to love. Art is the mirror in which we see ourselves and the hope is that with this mirror, I can help to provide healing, intervention, and remediation as well as prevention to the community as a whole. It is my expectation that this work raises some critical questions such as, how might artists contribute to the under-served community and what is the responsibility of artists to the community?

In this thesis paper, I will discuss the artists who influenced me greatly, my involvement with the community, and the evolution of the work itself.

My work is not made to teach people or to tell them what they don't know, but rather to bring out anew things that they already know, to provoke a situation in which they have to confront these issues differently, in a different light, with a different sensitivity. ²

Background Influences

Since the Enlightenment, artists have taken it upon themselves to travel the world enter into unknown communities, and leave without a trace, placing their subsequent work in a gallery and calling it art - no questions asked. This makes them no different from the documentary photographer who swaggers around, snapping an 'objective' view of society. From high art we go to the other extreme, community arts practice, which at times has had an equally problematic approach, thriving uncritically on the idea that art should be for the benefit of the community, as a means of instigating social worth and change. The problem with both these approaches is that the community is seen as a homogeneous mass, all difference redundant. This forsakes any complexities inherent in the term community, in pursuit of the rainbow-coloured melting pot.³

I first became aware of the power of photography in socially engaged documentary work in 1989 during my undergraduate studies in London. Artists like Christian Boltanski, Willie Doherty, Victor Burgin, Alfredo Jaar, Sebastiao Salgado and many more inspired me. Understanding their ideological and artistic strategies has helped me to gain a better understanding of my own personal beliefs as an artist.

If sometime our great artists have been most critical of our society, it is because their sensitivity and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, make him aware that our nation falls short of its highest potential.⁴

Boltanski's and Salgado's works are about the human condition. Salgado employs a humanistic approach to photography while Boltanski incorporates other installational elements like biscuit tins, and clothing along with appropriated photographic images. Burgin uses a conceptual approach to comment on social issues. Jaar uses large scale works to examine third world exploitation in a global economy.

Doherty employs poetic strategies through photography and video

installation to foreground the representation of violence in Northern Ireland. All of the artists that are mentioned here have very strong political beliefs and see social change as critical to their work.

There are times when large groups of artists mobilize around a social cause. In the thirties, the Farm Security Administration (FSA), with its founder, Roy Stryker, and his staff, had given a voice to a community that needed to be heard. This government-sponsored group had its very own agenda. Many great photographers from the FSA, like Walker Evans, Dorothy Lange and others, had a unique approach to the hardship of the farmers. However, the founder and photo-editor, Stryker, also had his own conception of what was best for the public to know and hole-punched the negatives that he deemed unnecessary. In many ways, the public saw the images of what Stryker wanted them to see.

In the eighties, many artists were politicized and organized to bring art which addressed issues of concern to the public forum. Jo Spence brought awareness of the politics of breast cancer while suffering from it by doing a photo-documentary on herself; Gran Fury, a New York based art collective made various political statements in their work. Aids, sexuality, religion, gender and race were among the themes that radical artists explored within communities. Many artists were involved in projects in the public sphere beyond gallery walls.

I would like to discuss three contemporary artists, whom I admire of because of their personal beliefs and commitment to the communities for whom they have worked. They are Christian Boltanski, Willie Doherty and Sebastiao Salgado.

Christian Boltanski's body of work is a disturbing archive of our social, cultural, ethnic, and personal histories. ⁵

In his installation, Boltanski uses newspaper clippings, photographs, found

snapshots, clothing, candles, light bulbs, and old biscuit tins. He uses photography as the central iconography in all his work, to explore its perceived truth and to examine how it is often used as a shield against death. He demonstrates the significance of photography for our understanding of memory, loss and death. Boltanski's exhibition, *Reconstitution*, held in London in 1990, influenced how I would proceed in my own thesis, in terms of installation.

In Boltanski's exhibition, *Reconstitution*, issues of death, mourning, sadness, are significant. When I stepped into the gallery then, I was in shocked by the clothes on the floor and the odor that came from them. I was initially puzzled as to why the artist would put the clothing on the floor. Suddenly I felt a sense of sadness. These were children's clothes. On the wall, Boltanski hung passport photographs of the children. This exhibition pays homage to the dead children of the Berlin Holocaust. Biscuit tins laying on top of another. The shadows of little wires and the large white cloth that surround the gallery had so many possible interpretation. I was bound spell by the strength of Boltanski's work.

*In Doherty's work, representation is a question of positioning the camera in relation to the object, the text in relation to the image, the viewer in relation to the physicality of the photographic installation.*⁶

The source and inspiration of Doherty's work has always been history and place in his native Northern Ireland. Doherty has a great understanding of the political and psychological uses of the tools of documentary reportage.

Doherty's earliest work with text appropriates the stable journalistic tools of the photograph and caption, subverting them by combining his photographic images of rural and urban Ireland with the language of political conflict and idealism in works like *The Wall* (1987) and *The Other Side* (1988). In his audio-visual work

Tell Me What You Want (1996) the viewer is left to observe a still image of a man's face and hear a conflicting set of messages, always spoken in a monotone voice. In his video installation work like *At the End of the Day* (1994), the experience is related to entering a cinema or watching a film in a dark space. The viewers are confronted directly by the control of his/her physical movement around the space. In this way, Doherty places the viewer in a gap between reading and understanding.

Sebastiao Salgado brings the world of the 'have nots' to those who live in plenty. ⁷

In his exhibition, *Migration*, Salgado shows his commitment to the community in the forty-seven countries that he worked with for six and a half years. He showed the positive side of migration for economical opportunity and the wars that move the many people from one place to another. Many of his images are iconographic, each one signify Salgado's view of human individuals in a particular situation. Audience will experience his view of human experience on both the grandest and the smallest scale by the size of the images he exhibit. Salgado reaches our hearts by engaging his own interest in what he was doing. Informed by his so-called capitalized education as a financial economist, he visually signifies to the world the sufferings caused by economic injustice and war that need to be addressed. Visually his images cross boundaries of race, culture and class.

The life Americans are living is not the product of only their work, but the product of the work of all the planet. ⁸

In different ways, these artists have challenged me to develop a socially meaningful, artistic practice of my own.

The Community

Everyone would like to be in one, but nobody is quite sure exactly what it is. "Community" is a curious word.⁹

In 1991, a grass root organization Families and Friends of Murdered Children Victims of Violence (FFMCVV), was formed by mothers who lost their children through violence got together. They formed the group to support families dealing with ongoing grieving process. The mission of the group is to advocate for victims' rights and the rights of survivors, promote violence awareness, reduction, and prevention and most importantly to support members through their grieving.

On August 31, 1991, Audrey Smith and her son, Ricky met for lunch, shared his favorite meal, and talked about his father's recent death. After lunch, both of them went their separate ways. A few hours later, Audrey was told that an unknown assailant viciously murdered her Ricky on the streets of Rochester over a parking space.

*A mother would never believe that she had to walk behind the coffin of her healthy son. I was devastated when I had to do it. Audrey**

Throughout the whole ordeal, Audrey Smith's pain and suffering was exacerbated through dealing with the hospital, police department, court and media coverage. Audrey gathered a few mothers who had experienced the same trauma as she had and decided to help anyone going through the agony. This was where the whole group started - from the kitchen of Audrey's home to an office today.

The group envisions a humane society, where people of all colors are treated with dignity and respect and live in a community free from fear and violence. Families and Friends of Murdered Children Victims of Violence, is also dedicated to supporting individuals and families who have lost a loved one to homicide or any

other act of violence, promoting violence awareness, reduction, and prevention and at the same time advocating for victim's rights and the rights of the survivors. The group works at the grass root level, getting survivors to be in direct contact with the emergency and social support agencies.

*We know that we have friends at the Grief Support Group meetings who will accept us as we are, and we know that we can cry without being criticized. Marie**

Involvement with the Community

One always has to face the question of representing the community or the communities and at the same time of not representing them, not speaking for them, something that is at the same time specific and collective. It's a very difficult task, and I guess it's a constant challenge. ¹⁰

I found out about the group, Families and Friends of Murdered Children Victims of Violence, after seeing a poster, WHO MURDERED MY SON, at a road junction. I was curious as to why the cry for public help was needed when the city does have a police force. I went to see Audrey Smith, the president of the group and explained my intention to be an observer and learn about the group.

When I attended the first meeting, I saw mothers crying while talking about their lost children. Many of them did not have any closure with the loss even though it had been five or ten years ago. This pain somehow touched me directly, when a girl, aged about fifteen, said, *"You lost your father through natural causes, he had been sick for quite some time, but somebody came and stole my father's life. He was a happy, healthy and loving person."*

My intention changed from being an observer in the early stage to volunteering with the group with their needs, like going to home visits, as well as to court and to funerals. I supported the office with administration and errands. I became involved with an outreach program with the Rochester City School District advocating against violence to high-risk students. I helped the students to identify violence that is happening in schools and public places and also in the media and showed students ways of preventing them by relating real life incidents. Every Saturday, I spent two hours teaching arts to children who had lost their loved ones through violence. I began to realize my potential as an art teacher while working

with these children who have a tough time emotionally at school and at home. At the art program, these children seemed bright and creative. I learned about their raw emotions during the course of the work.

With my direct involvement with the group, I began to make new friends, many of whom lost their loved ones through violence. I began to gain their trust and began to be a part of their family. I wondered how I could use my art to assist these families with their emotions.

Thesis Project

Adopting the position that an individual should only speak for his/herself raises similar difficult questions. If I don't speak for the less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege? If I should not speak for others, should I restrict myself to following their lead uncritically? Is my greatest contribution to move over and get out of the way? If so, what is the best way to this - to keep silent or to deconstruct my own discourse?¹¹

Before arriving in Rochester, I had been doing documentary work in Singapore. At Rochester Institute of Technology, I tried different working methods, from photography to video. The Deaf Community here intrigued me. Benjamin Lee Whorf's **What Is Language?** prompted me to explore this issue through art. I made friends from different countries who spoke in their native language. I requested them to translate the quotation "What is language?" into their native language, which I recorded on video. My nine friends who speak Chinese, Malay, Spanish, Korean, Thai, Burmese, Portuguese, Russian, and American Sign Language helped me with my project. I did an installation with three monitors and video players. Each video had three speakers each and their language was on the wall facing the monitor set. What viewer sees is a mirror image of "foreigners" speaking their native language and expressing themselves culturally.

In the second quarter I returned to documentary photography. The U.S. government had granted a few billion dollars to educate the young public about the dangers of drugs. I had been working on this issue in Singapore, using photography as a tool of communication. But at the same time, I was working with Macromedia Director, a software program. I decided to create an interactive media for children,

ages 8 - 14 years, about the direct danger of drugs. I used images from the media and my own to emphasize the dangers. The reason for using an interactive program was to gain the children's interest in what they were doing.

To support my living expenses, I took up a part-time job delivering pizza. During one of my rounds, I saw the poster that read "WHO MURDERED MY SON? PLEASE CALL" at a road junction. I was shocked to see that the victim was a young man. I went on the internet and requested information about homicide in the area where I was working. I received one e-mail from someone who had been keeping up with homicide news in Rochester. The note told of the dates, places and incidents that had taken place. I went around to the addresses given and photographed them from the exterior. During my walk-through, the e-mail was put up first followed by the photograph "Who Murdered My Son". Then followed by the images of the places given in the e-mail. There were a couple of images of a bridge, which told the audience about the area where crimes were often committed. The sizes of the images were three feet long and two feet high. Every night I made a video clip which shows the dark eeriness of those places.

Through this work, I got in touch with Families & Friends of Murdered Children Victims of Violence. My time spent at the group was valuable. I decided to focus my thesis on the topic of death through violence. The group made suggestions. I learned a lot by observing how the survivors would react to the loss of a loved one. I learned never to question the family member who lost the loved one through violence about closure. Simply, for the survivors there will be no closure.

I went looking for a space to show my work. I approached Link Gallery, Center for High Falls and Writers & Books. Link Gallery was too small, and Center

for High Falls was not able to accommodate the traffic that I wished to have.

Writers & Books had a small gallery and allowed me to do whatever was required.

Even though the space is small, it was once a real jail cell in a police precinct.

There was this iron bar door and I felt that the space was ideal for my work.

Artist Statement

Where Do We Go From Here

One of the hardest kinds of death to accept is that of one's child. You wonder "why not me, why him?" It's a rude reminder that death follows no predictable timetable, but chooses it's own time and place.¹²

The alarming rise in violence in the City of Rochester among youth brings heightened concern to most citizen. Through violence families are losing their children at a very young age. But who is to blame for this social ill behavior in the society? Is it the media, the movies, the drugs, the freedom to own a gun, the thrill of wanting to be famous, the system, the economy? Is it safe to walk around the block not knowing if I will be the next target?

Having volunteered with the group Families and Friends Murdered Children Victims of Violence, I became conscious of people who lost their loved one through violence and I feel their plight of agony. Words alone cannot express their pain and sorrow. Even tears cannot mend the grief of their loss. Not only have they to cope with trying to move on with their lives but also must deal with a judicial system that gives them little or nothing.

As an artist, I represent these friends by bringing their tragedy out to the public. The aim of this artwork is to create an awareness of the reality of these deaths and how they so drastically affected the lives of the survivors – the true victims of the crime.

Memorial

*Coming through the door... as I looked toward this space, my breath went away and I said, "I can't go in"... I feel ashamed to think that so many died in violence and this is only a portion of the total. This has moved me greatly not only for her but all others. Linda****

All over the world,
we can see many memorial
walls dedicated to the
heroes of wars. The
Vietnam Veterans'



Memorial, the Korean War, Oklahoma City National Memorial and many more are up in public areas as remembrances of the dead heroes [and really innocent victims]. However, a public memorial wall for victims of violence in every state is not ideal or even politically correct. One of the stereotypical perception is that most of the victims are possibly past felons, or that homicide is something that is commonplace. Community activists had been lobbying to have City Halls around the country dedicate a wall space to the victims of violence. Many legislators are reluctant to side with the activists because homicide is a political issue.

Politics is primarily and increasingly a struggle for control of the visible, for the distribution of gazes, the configuration of the sensible.¹³

In 1981, the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial design was awarded to Maya Ying Lin. The public, as well as many surviving members of the Vietnam Veterans was surprised to discover that Miss Lin was a 21-year old Chinese-American art student at Yale, who made the design as a class project. The simple design was two ten (10) foot high polished black granite walls set at a one hundred and twenty five

(125) degree angle, each two hundred and fifty (250) feet long, set into a slight rise in the lawns. The names of the dead were to be engraved, not alphabetically, but in order in which they had been killed; the designer planned that observers would see their own reflections in the polished stone. Many see Maya Ying Lin's design as an anti-war monument.

Families and Friends of Murdered Children Victims of Violence, (FFMCVV) hold an annual dedication ceremony for a memorial wall at community centers. The group will normally start with a walk or motorcade from an area where the latest violence occurred to the community center. As the group grows yearly, the new names are typed onto a piece of paper and paste onto the wall. Every year the wall would move from one center to another. The public was seldom informed of the wall ceremony or even as to the venue of the wall.

I was intrigued by Maya Ying Lin's design, and as an artist, I decided to replicate a wall to dedicate to the victims of violence but in an art gallery, with a small budget. At the Cell Gallery, the wall space facing the entrance is twenty-two feet long and eleven feet high. My aim was to have all the names of the victims from January 1990 till April 20,1998, a total of five hundred and sixteen names, on the wall visible from five feet away. The names of the victims would be in the order of incidence beginning from January 1990 till April 1998. I started looking for a material that (a) was reflective, (b) the size that I want (c) could hold all the names on it and (d) was within my budget.

I decided to get the work ink printed on a roll of paper sized twenty feet long by five feet high and have it laminated. With the lamination and setting the light in the gallery to an angle, the viewers were able to see their own reflections.

The title, IN MEMORY OF OUR LOVED ONES WHO LOST THEIR

LIVES THROUGH VIOLENCE, was used after many discussions with many



families. Ideas like to Our Loved Ones, who were taken away from us suddenly or Loved Ones, who were killed, were suggested.

I got the names of the victims and date of incidence from the District Attorney's office. The group, FFMCVV got me directly in touch with the office. When I was typing the names into my computer, it seems as though I knew many of them through the media and their families.

On the opening night of the work, the first guest that stepped into the gallery cried as she saw the name of her brother on the wall. Many would just go through the names to find out if any of their relatives or even close friends were on it. A family member brought a wreath to the ceremony.

This wall brought many memories back for the family members as well as the police officers and even the public. The names were no longer statistics, but people whom the loved ones will miss forever. Police officers came to talk about their part at a scene of one of the homicides. The public might remember a particular homicide case that was in the media or maybe that the murderer was on trial.



*You have personalized the tragedy so we don't forget. Stern****

Photographic Shrines

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit of symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action. ¹⁴

I faced difficulties with many families when I requested to come to their houses to create a photographic shrine of their loved ones. At this stage, I felt that many of the families did not wish to share the shrine with the public who may not understand the pain and sadness that they had. However, I managed to create a total of fifteen photographic shrines. The gallery space is intimate, too small for all fifteen prints. The size of each work is four feet long by three feet. The size of the wall in the gallery is twenty-three feet long. I only could accommodate a total of four on each side, with a foot apart from each photograph. The selections of the photographs were based on the stories that I had to go through before given the opportunity to photograph the shrine.



Ms. Jopp's son, José Gonzales, was murdered on February 14, 1998. I had a difficult time getting an appointment set because of the pain and sorrow she and her family were going through at that time. I made my request about two weeks after the incident. After many calls, she told me that I could do it but only for five minutes and I had to be at her place in ten minutes after talking to her on the phone.

I quickly rushed to her house within ten minutes. She looked very sad and I decided



to go straight to photograph the son's room where nothing had been touched or moved.

There, she started to relate the morning of February 14. José was happy that morning and

tidied his room. He would normally wear a white baseball cap before he left the house. But Jose wore a black cap that day instead. He told his mom that he would be back to play chess with a friend of his later that day and reminded her not to let anyone in the house to touch the chessboard that was put on his bed. When Ms Jopp was relating the story, tears fell from her face. Jose's room was left untouched since the incident. I was there for more than fifteen minutes and was given the opportunity to photograph what I needed.

Mrs. Cleveland's daughter, Tiara, was killed at Gennese Valley Park in the late hours of the night. All she had left her mom on the day of the incident was her bowling ball and shoes and told her about a tournament that she was playing. Tiara's friends gave the airbrushed T-shirt to Mrs. Cleveland on the day of the funeral. These were the only things that Mrs. Cleveland had of



Tiara. Mrs. Cleveland had said that she had wished that Tiara would have a baby before she left the world. The bowling ball and shoes became so precious to Mrs. Cleveland.

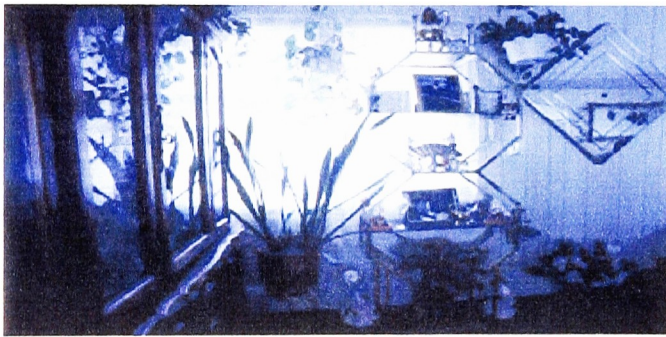
Mrs. Crittenden had lost three children through violence on the streets of Rochester. The latest was her daughter, Crystal, who had four children of her own. When I stepped in

Mrs. Crittenden's house, there was a room where her three children's shrine was located. It was dimly lit, a place that one would go for



meditation. There were small chairs around the table where photographs of the deceased were placed. I felt that when one missed them, they would sit on the chair and pray. Big stuffed animals belonging to Crystal occupied the space.

A stray bullet shot Mrs. Gregory's son, Greg, one night, as he was about to leave Red Wing Plaza. The bullet went straight into his head. Mrs. Gregory was

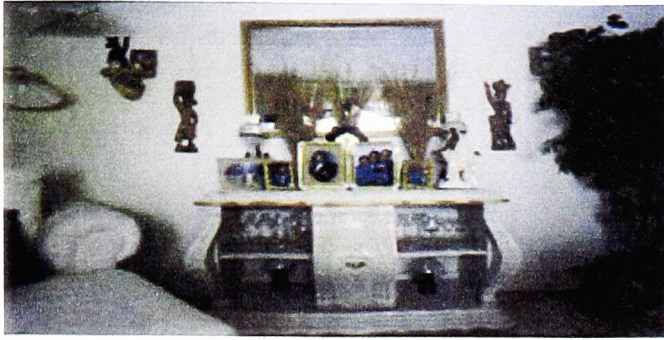


very sad, as her son's murderer had not been caught. Every time she talked of Greg, her eldest son, she just started crying. Greg

bought the display unit for his awards; also it is one thing that Mrs. Gregory valued because Greg bought the display unit with his first paycheck not long ago.

Ms. Blake was a person who was difficult to get hold of because she worked practically every day and night. She told me that with work she was able to take control of her life rather than coping with the loss of her eldest son, Harvey. However, the long hours at work took a toll on her health. I managed to get an appointment set up and I went to the house not knowing about the death of Harvey. Harvey paid the monthly bill for the house since they moved in. Ms. Blake showed

me around the house and said, *"This was where he shot Harvey."* I was shocked;



staring at the kitchen door as Ms. Blake was showing me the bullet holes that went through Harvey. She showed other bullet holes around the house that the gunman fired that

nearly took her daughter's life as well. On the night of the incident, the family was reading a verse from the Bible and discussing it among themselves. Ms Blake had left the Bible sitting on the kitchen table since then. The shrine where Harvey's personal things were was above the fireplace. Ms Blake said that Harvey built this fireplace from scratch and Harvey loved it very much.

Ms. Flager lost her eldest, fourteen-year-old son through violence. She admitted that Michael was not a very good boy and had done mischief but Michael had been a good sportsman especially in basketball. He was at the wrong



place at the wrong time was how the investigator explained it to Ms. Flager. Michael had a brother, Mark, who had since been very vocal about violence. The trophies and a black and white picture of Michael were the only things that Ms. Flager had.

Ms. Constance lost her thirteen-year-old son, Ralik, about seven years ago. Ralik was coming home from Sunday church school and was shot by a stray bullet. The stray bullet was from gangs who were fighting at that area. Ralik was a good

and bright boy, and his Mom had high hopes of him graduating. The Bible was the same Bible that Ralik brought with him to that Sunday school.



Mr. Joey Romano's twin brother, Nick, was killed on Halloween night three

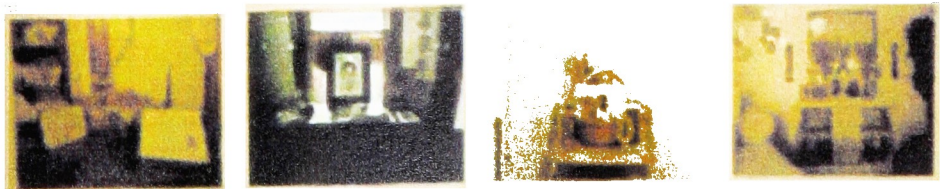


years ago in the back yard of the house. Nick had refused to give a beer to one of the guys that night, and as Nick was on his way back to the house, the

gunman opened fire at Nick and killed him instantly. Joey was full of regret for that night and the shrine showed Nick's achievement for wanting to be a pilot and also an aircraft engineer.

In all cultures, I find that everyone has a way to remember their loved ones. Some have a bigger space than others do. The love that everyone shares here seems to be universal regardless of how one lost their loved one. I made these images to suggest the power of photography to provide to the viewer a longing, nostalgia and melancholy for the lives of those pictured at home.

*The pictures are very powerful. Elaine****



Items belonging to the victims

*I want my art to be like a mirror. Everyone who looks at it sees himself, but every reflection is different and the artist holding the glass up doesn't exist any more. There is never a clear meaning or moral. You arrive at enlightenment yourself.*¹⁵

During my involvement with the children in the community, we talked about feelings. Many of the children expressed that whenever they missed their loved one, they would go to the closet/cupboard where the clothing and belongings of their loved ones were kept and would cry. They even talk about the incident as though the loved one was listening. This custom is universal. When my niece was an infant, her grandmother cared for her. But when her grandmother passed away, she cried every day and night. The custom was to bring one article of the clothing belonging to her grandmother and put it close to her and this did stop her from crying. As old eastern saying puts it:

the body odor of someone close is as sweet as perfume.

The items of clothing in Boltanski's exhibition, "*Reconstitution*", haunted me. I decided with the help of the survivors to bring items belonging to the victims into the gallery.

In this area of work, the participation of the community was overwhelming. During the biweekly meetings with the group, I requested personal items of the victims, from clothing to anything that the families would like to share. Many provided clothing but some surprises were the hair of the victim, the diary, and the last photograph together, sports and scholastic awards, a bowling ball and shoes and one victim's shirt with the bullet hole that killed him. Even a few days after the opening, many members came by the gallery and dropped off more items like notebooks, photographs, and a stethoscope. It went on till the last day of the

exhibition. The sense of sharing these precious mementos with the public reinforces that the loved one was just another ordinary person in the neighborhood who owned many of the same items that we have.

In the installation, there was a cupboard with mirror doors. Inside there were many articles of the clothing such as jeans, T-shirts, sweatshirts, baseball caps and



jackets. Some were hung while the rest were folded. This cupboard was facing the wall, so that when you were about to open the door,

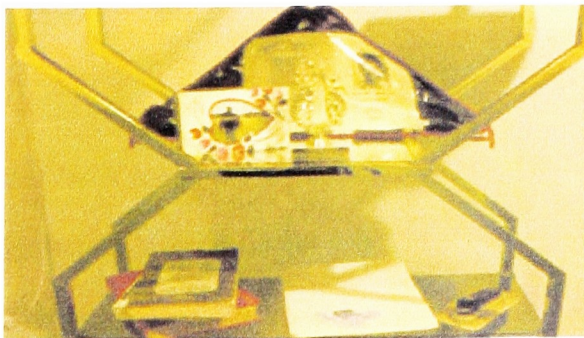
the reflection of the wall where the names were, could be seen.

Mrs. Gregory, who lost her son about a year ago, had a metal display unit that she used at home for her son's shrine. Her son, Greg, bought the display unit for the house to hold his awards.

The story touched me so much I requested Mrs. Gregory to lend me the display unit during the exhibition. On this display unit,



I put many different items from sports and scholastic awards to photographs and



books belonging to different victims. Mrs. Gregory, who had a hard time coping with her loss, felt a relief that the display unit not only holds

her son's belongings but also those of other victims. She said, "*All these angels are*

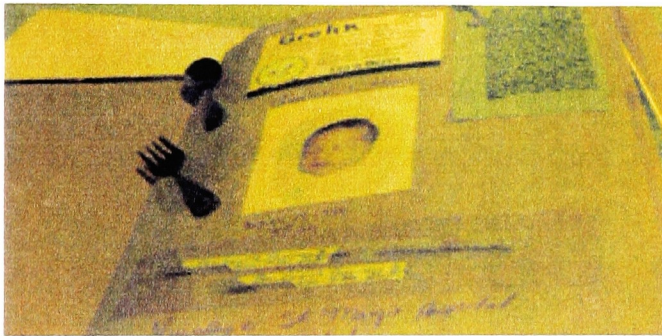
*in heaven with Greg and Greg will be proud."***

There were two pedestals at the gallery, one that held a chessboard, which belongs to José Gonzales and the other a book, made by a mom for her son.

Rosemary Moore had always created a book for every one of her children. Beginning from birth, awards and practically everything her child did was



put together in the book. This was one of Rosemary's ways of giving a present to her children's twenty-first birthday. In 1996, she had given one to her daughter at

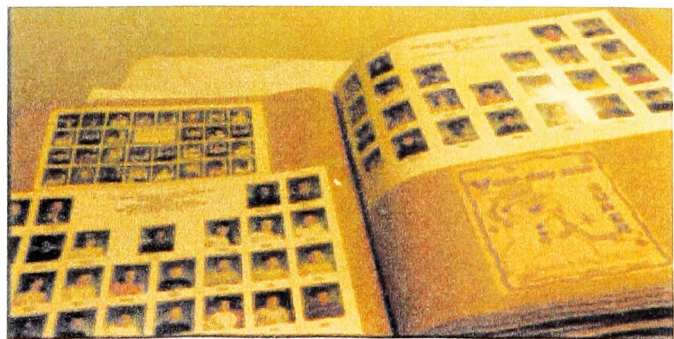


her twenty-first birthday. But the one that she had brought to the gallery was in memory of her son, Derrick, who was killed at the age of sixteen in

1997. In it, again, from his birth, to his first cigarette, to his daughter, to his funeral and letters of condolences from everyone who knew him, everything was inside the book.

Many of the parents at the exhibition who went through the book could experience how Rosemary felt in the beginning putting this book together.

However, they could not experience Rosemary's last



few pages. Everyone shared the same joy of a child coming into the world, but the

agony of losing one child at an early age seems unbearable. Many tears were shed looking through the book. I was spellbound going through the book for the first time.

"Every time I think of Derrick, this book is close to me,"
cries Rosemary**

During the exhibition, two high school students accompanied by a police officer came by the gallery. They looked around the wall and the photographs of the shrine. Rosemary Moore was there and talked to them about her son's death and how sad she was. The boys related well to Rosemary. They recalled some of their own school photographs being taken. When I told the boys to look into the cupboard, just to see what the victims were wearing the day they died, the two boys freaked out and did not even have the courage to open the cupboard door. The effect on those two so-called 'high-risk' students from the urban school district highlighted the sense of fear and respect for the belongings of the victims.

Community and the Public

*"I will trade my soul with Satan if he could tell me who my son's murderer was." Rosemary Moore.***

My initial plan for this area of work was to have monitors setup around the gallery with different survivors' monologue. The logistic was accessible but after doing a survey with school children, ages 10-17 years, the idea was dropped because of the attention span of the children watching was short. I brought a few tapes to different schools and the percentage of children paying attention to the screen for more than five minutes was far too little. Children may be able to watch movies of their interest for more than an hour but when there is not action on the screen, it seems to bore them faster. As many of them would say, *"It's not about me or my family, it is about them."*

We all know that watching television isn't the same as observing events of the day. ¹⁶

Whenever I had discussions in schools, the children had questions to ask. This led to questions relating to my position in the group. As I have not lost anyone through violence, I do not feel right answering the children in regards to the pain or agony that the families feel. I represent the group in helping to identify violence in school but not on a personal level of losing one loved one. This was when I decided to bring the survivors and the children into the gallery to have an open discussion.

The practice of speaking for others is problematic, so too must be practice of speaking about others. ¹⁷

The survivors who came to discuss their plight were doing this as a healing process. This process was to share their agony, their pain with people who did not know their loved ones. This strengthens the community and helps to provide a safer

society. One police officer from the Rochester Police Department, homicide division, was there daily to discuss how some of the victims were killed and the outcome of some of the homicides.

"A gunman came up to this young man (pointing at the name on the wall) and his friend and demanded their jackets. His friend just took out and gave the gunman his jacket, while this young man just said, "What!" and the gunman just fired a shot through his heart."
Officer Annie Craven Walker,**

The sharing of this information with the law enforcement at the gallery seems more direct. With this sharing, it helps the community to trust law enforcement officers.

Prior to the opening of the exhibition, I had made arrangements with schools and community organizations to bring their children to talk with the survivors. It was not very difficult, as this was to be a field trip for many of them during that time of the year. After hearing what the survivors had to share, many left the gallery with tears in their eyes.

"I heard my son calling, 'Mom, Mom, Help Me!' I ran out of the house and saw Derrick on the floor. I held him close to me and I say, 'Derrick, hang on!' and he say, 'I love you, Mom' and that was his last breath. He was only sixteen years old." Rosemary Moore.**

Exhibition

*This is an example of how art can increase public awareness. Jane ****

With approximately three hundred guests, I found the opening of the exhibition overwhelming. Several of the guests were families and friends of the victims. Many of them were not aware what an art-opening exhibition was all about. The majority ethnic group was African American and they came dressed up for an occasion. The occasion was a memorial, a day of remembrance of all the lives taken by violence, and a celebration to have their sorrow heard. Many brought their own cameras and photographed the event. Several families posed next to the photograph or even the names on the wall and the mementos. This event seemed to be a healing process for many of them.

At times the silence in the gallery lent respect to the surrounding work. Survivors would go up to strangers and openly talked about their loss. Hugs and tears were shared.

*.... the space[is] both sad and hopeful....a special space to contemplate issues of death, memory and mourning. Angela ****

Guests from the public sectors, such as the police force, the district attorney's office, the mayor's office and even from the fire department were there to share their moments with the survivors.

*... putting faces to the statistics! Molly****

Schools and community organizations came in busloads daily to the exhibition. While engaging in discussions with the survivors, many left the space with tears in their eyes and full of sadness.

The local Rochester newspaper, *Democrat and Chronicle*, interviewed me

about my work. James Goodman, the reporter, told me that many people had called in and requested that the newspaper should publish my work. The exhibition was extended due to the article in the papers. A couple of television stations also did a community service spot about my work. During my exhibition, Harvard University, School of Public Health Division held the first 'live' teleconference about violence to fifty-two cities around the nation. My work was included in their three-hour presentation. The following year, I was invited to show my work in Boston for their second conference.

The exhibition helped the community to mourn as well as to strive towards something which needs to be done. I was delighted to read that the homicide rate in Rochester for that year of my exhibition fell to thirty after ten years of having an average of fifty a year.

Conclusion

The artists that I mentioned in my **Background Influences** have demonstrated a sense of responsibility to community issues. Their commitment to social change in their art is evident in bringing specific communities and all the general public closer. It is within the context of these artistic practices that my work may be located and understood.

The responsibility of artists towards under-served communities is to help to build a bridge across to the unbridgeable (that is to convey a clear message for these communities to the larger public). Conveying creative artwork about the community tells as much as the artist's ideology as about the community. Some artists who exhibit in galleries fear that by working within the communities, they will be seen as serving political ideology rather than functioning as artists. Their motivations may be questioned. The sincerity of the artist for the community comes from within oneself.

In my exhibition, the survivors were given public notice and the courage and opportunity to speak with their objects about their plight in front of them.

The community, FFMCVV, with whom I collaborated, faces many problems with the public as a whole. To the stereotypical public, one homicide that occurred on the streets of Rochester means death of a felon. The statistic of getting killed by a stray bullet for being at the wrong place at the wrong time is very low. The ripple effect of a loss of a loved one through violence can never be felt by anyone else except those involved. To contradict this stereotypical mentality, I have shown the positive side of the community of survivors.

When I first observed the community, I was just concerned about the welfare of the living siblings around. Could I use art as a healing process for many of them?

I was learning about their reaction in the public arena and in the courtroom, the feelings that the living siblings had before and after the loss of a loved one but also the lack of closure. No words could explain their feelings. When I decided to volunteer for the community, it took me about three years to gain their trust to allow me to get close. A feeling that indulges one to cry and laugh at the same time, cry that the loved one is gone but laugh at the jokes the survivors lived by, (*"He used to sit there digging his nose"*). I shared many private moments with the members.

Having gained the trust of these survivors opened up different ideas to my work. During many of our informal discussions, ideas as to what was best for the public to know and see was brought forth. Many members suggested showing the weapons with which the loved ones were killed, the drugs that one had on them when they died and also having all the five hundred and sixteen photographs hung on the wall. Some of the ideas were great, but the fact of getting the photographs had always been a tougher job for the community themselves than doing it myself. When I suggested my plan of my exhibition verbally, many were skeptical about it. Everyone changed his or her mind after viewing the exhibition. When I requested assistance, many of them volunteered their time for the cause. The survivors helped build more contacts for me and allowed me into their private moments.

I believe my work has done a service to the community by helping them to express themselves to the art world as well as to the public. The message of the exhibition is very clear and the public responded very well in understanding the plight of the survivors. Many come away from the exhibition with a less stereotypical sense of the victims and felt that the loss was a person loved by many.

By keeping faith with the people who trusted me and using my artistic skills, I feel that I was able to give them a voice. I managed to truly help them and I did

not exploit them in anyway.

Compared to the artists who influenced me, my work came out of a specific context with a specific group of individuals. As an artist, I have touched a local community who has in turn touched my life.

Where Do We Go From Here, reflects my hope and aspirations to continue the journey as an artist who is committed to working in the community context.

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13. Andre Rouille - Art history, pp 237
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